

northwest

Queer and Homeless

Forum addresses issues concerning Portland's most vulnerable citizens

by Frances Miller

City leaders searched for role models in their attempt to tackle the tough issue of homelessness among queer youth. According to specialists, 40 percent of Portland's homeless youth identify as queer or sexual minority, higher than the national average. Homeless sexual minority youth along with Multnomah County Chairman Ted Wheeler and representatives from Outside In and the Sexual Minority Youth Resource Center (SMYRC) hosted a policy and program forum Feb. 21 on issues critical to that population. The focus was on both identifying challenges for queer homeless youth in Portland and discussing what other major cities have done to find solutions to these problems.

According to a study conducted by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the National Coalition for the Homeless, 50 percent of queer and questioning youth were subject to negative reactions, including physical and emotional abuse from their parents, when they came out. One in four queer youth were kicked out of their homes as a result of disclosing their sexuality. Many teens are left on the streets with few, if any, safe places to go.

Kat, who chose to withhold her last name, is bisexual and pregnant. When she came out to her family, she experienced intense biphobia and verbal abuse from her mother. Her father was less demonstrative in his reaction but became increas-

ingly watchful of Kat with any female friends. He would no longer allow her to share a bedroom with her sister. Kat decided to leave home, explaining that it felt like an unsafe and painful place to live. Recently Kat tried to visit her family. "I went last weekend to see them, but they had left town just to avoid me," she said.

Despite gains in legal rights for sexual minorities, situations like Kat's are still common in many families. For young adults who can't get into or don't feel safe at their local temporary shelter, the streets offer fewer opportunities for safety. Homeless youth who are sexual minorities are more likely to experience assault than their heterosexual counterparts. According to a survey conducted in 2005 by the National Runaway Switchboard, queer youth are seven times more likely to become crime victims. Rej Joo, a queer and trans youth advocate at Outside In, found that in a survey of 123 youth participants, 29 percent had engaged in sex work for food and shelter. Studies show that queer homeless youth are more vulnerable to risky sexual behavior, mental health issues and substance abuse than straight homeless youth. All of these obstacles make it difficult for young adults to hope and plan for a viable future adulthood.

SMYRC and Outside In have co-created a project aimed at supporting queer homeless youth called Queerzone, financed by the United Way. At

the forum, youth speakers participating in Queerzone identified obstacles they face on the streets. Later, participants at the forum broke into small groups and discussed potential solutions using examples of what places like Seattle, Massachusetts and New York have done to confront this issue. Both Seattle and New York have teen homeless shelters dedicated solely to sexual minorities. Massachusetts has implemented mandatory cultural competency training for more than 2,000 state and government employees around the issue of queer youth homelessness.

Participants in the forum agreed that gains were being made to combat homelessness. The consensus at the forum was that, in Portland, queer teens need a dedicated shelter to feel safer and more accepted. It was also agreed that all staff people at local agencies that serve queer youth need to undergo competence training on queer issues at least once a year and that they can clearly demonstrate competency on sexual minority issues. One of the youth speakers, who identified himself only as E, noted: "Having to educate and train your counselors on your own oppression makes it hard to

trust that counselor or agency."

Other ideas at the event included peer education programs, increased federal and state funding for sexual minority youth programs, longer drop-in hours for homeless youth and services that focus on getting this vulnerable population planning for their futures. 10

For more information about OUTSIDE IN call 503-535-3800 or visit www.outsidein.org.

For more information about the SEXUAL MINORITY YOUTH RESOURCE CENTER call 503-872-9664 or visit www.smyrc.org.

Visit QUEERZONE at www.myspace.com/queerzone07.

FRANCES MILLER is an activist and writer in Portland.



Outside In joined other partners in addressing issues affecting the queer teen homeless population at a forum Feb. 21.

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